

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1956

Volume XVII, Number 9

• Rachel W. Coffin, Editor •

Week of April 9, 1956

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 NEW YORK DAILY NEWS NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
 NEW YORK POST NEW YORK TIMES

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"Affair of Honor"

DAILY NEWS

April 7, 1956

Dennis King Does All He Could for 'Affair of Honor,' but Not Enough

By JOHN CHAPMAN

About one minute after the curtain went up on "Affair of Honor" at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre last evening, a minor character started the buildup of the major character by saying, "He's the one that campaigns against men in the daytime and women at night."

I had the uneasy feeling that this was the keynote and that the whole play was going to sound like this—and I was right. "Affair of Honor," written by Bill Hoffman, is a fancy dress comedy in fancy dress language. Inscribed, possibly, on the theory that one good phrase deserves another turn, it is loaded to the muzzle with epigrams, four or five of which are good.

A Period Piece

Happily for me, Dennis King is the man who is intrusted with most of the witsnapping, and Dennis is so skilled a player that he can make almost anything

sound amusing and intelligent. Last evening he conducted a one-man campaign against a stuffy playwright and almost won.

The period of the comedy is 1777, during our War of Divorcement. The locale is a tavern up near the Vermont border in York State. Maj. Dennis King, one of His Majesty's redcoats, is campaigning against us homespun Americans in elegant style. Elegant? It's practically luciusbebe.

Stout Girl!

But there is one fiery lass, played by Betsy Palmer, whom he

cannot conquer. Even when he declares that, if she doesn't submit, he will hang the man who loves her, her brother and practically all other males in her village, this girl merely lifts a lip and says, "Go ahead, string 'em up."

So they talk about this the rest of the evening. It doesn't sound anything like Shaw's "The Devil's Dilemma." Just looks like it.

Among the other brave actors whom the Theatre Guild has assembled for this costume party are William Prince, as the headstrong lover; Edith King, James Hickman, Stanley Bell and Anita Dangler. Robert Douglas is credited with the direction and Ralph Alswang with one of those antique shoppe settings so necessary to the Revolutionary period.

"AFFAIR OF HONOR"

Comedy by Bill Hoffman; staged by Robert Douglas; production designed and lighted by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Gene Coffin; presented by the Theatre Guild in association with Theatre 200 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, April 6, 1956. The cast:

James Mackenzie.....
Charlotte Mackenzie.....
Daryl Grimes.....
Mrs. Mackenzie.... Edith King
Sally Mackenzie... Betsy Palmer
Capt. Tom Cochran.....
William Prince.....
Judiah Floyd... William Whitehead
Charles Henry... Charles Mendick
Cleeve Williams... Skedje Miller
Edward Taunton.....
Albert M. Ottenheimer.....
Martin Erskine... Jimmy Yoham
1st Soldier of the Crown.....
Bruce Brighton.....
2nd Soldier of the Crown.....
Ben Janney.....
A Corporal..... Ross Winston
Sergeant Gerling... Stanley Bell
Major Rogers.... Dennis King
Mary Wilson.... Anita Dangler
Maud Erskine.... Doris Rich
Betty Williams... Mary Loane
Polly Floyd..... Toni Darnay
A Traveling Lady.....
Margaret O'Neill

Daily Mirror

April 7, 1956

Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

'Affair of Honor' At Barrymore Theatre

• Dennis King is great — a hilarious hit in a well meaning miss.

Dennis King, a wizard with the well-turned phrase, took an amiable little comedy called "Affair of Honor," Friday evening, and almost succeeded in convincing the first-nighters at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre that they were enjoying a play of genuine merit.

Bill Hoffman has penned the piece about the legendary exploits of a British army major who, during the Revolutionary War, fancied himself a devil with the women. The aging roue was known as "Mad Dog Rogers," be-

cause he was reckless in war and romance. He had as few scruples as Casanova.

THE WILY SCOUNDREL offered seven hostages their lives if a pretty tavern maid would

keep him company for a night. When she eventually agreed, the proud Don Juan discovered that there were strings attached to the dalliance. He had been outsmarted by the minx.

"Affair of Honor" is on the thin side. It seeks to juggle a frail basic idea for three acts, and is only intermittently successful. Its paradoxical sallies about ethics and honor seem brightly turned when King is working his magic with them. But they lose their sparkle when he leaves the spotlight.

"Mad Dog Rogers" is a distant cousin of Shaw's "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne, which King acted with such consummate wit and grace in a revival of "The Devil's Disciple." He is a seemingly shallow man who makes quite a bit of sense from nonsense. To watch King create the role has all the fascination of following the pyrotechnics of a polished prestidigitator.

WHEN "AFFAIR OF Honor" has been forgotten, playgoers will still be talking about King's

vain and cynical "Mad Dog Rogers." For it is a masterpiece of comedy caricature. Urbane, crisp, incisive and slick. Beautifully spoken and mimed with trenchant effect. A model of high style.

Betsy Palmer is attractive as the colonial Mona Vanna who can match trick for trick with a knowing adversary. William Prince is forthright as a Revolutionary firebrand. Anita Dangler is amusing as a buxom belle who catches the Major's roving eye for a moment. And Stanley Bell stands out as a supercilious sergeant.

The Theatre Guild, in association with Theatre 200, Inc., has commissioned Ralph Alswang to design another of his ingenious productions, and director Robert Douglas to point up the evening's humor.

But it is King who dominates "Affair of Honor," as Gibraltar does the gateway to the Mediterranean. The man is marvelous! A hilarious hit in a well meaning miss.

"Affair of Honor"—continued

The New York Times

April 7, 1956

Theatre: 'Affair of Honor'

Hoffman Play Staged at Ethel Barrymore

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AT the end of the first act of "Affair of Honor," which opened at the Ethel Barrymore last evening, a gentleman remarked to his lady: "There are some phases of this play that remind you of a turkey."

But one should never eavesdrop on opinions. At the end of the second act, another gentleman was angrily announcing: "I think this is better than 'Oklahoma!'" There are invariably as many opinions about a play as there are people in the audience.

This department agrees with the first opinion except for its moderation. "Affair of Honor" represents the theatre's com-

pulsion to fail ingloriously. Bill Hoffman, the author, spends three acts discussing a Revolutionary War situation facetiously, as if he hoped that he might be George Bernard Shaw.

A British major threatens to hang seven Yankees as spies unless a girl he has taken a fancy to consents to his seducing her. Although Mr. Hoffman writes jocosely and at times with elaborate rhetoric his comedy comes under the head of pornography.

Probably the idea that he may imagine himself as a latter-day Shaw derives from the fact that Dennis King, who plays the amorous major, once gave a roistering performance

in "The Devil's Disciple," also a play about the American Revolution. The resemblance stops here. Mr. King's current part is less squalid than the part he had last season in "Lunatics and Lovers." But it is not much more fastidious.

Under the stock-company direction of Robert Douglas, a lot of actors work hard to make "Affair of Honor" look interesting. They include Betsy Palmer, William Prince, Edith King, Daryl Grimes and innumerable others who shout, run, make violent gestures and otherwise try to keep the audience's mind off the play.

But their efforts fail. The play keeps showing through, and it is dull and odious.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

April 7, 1956

Dennis King Helps 'Affair of Honor'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Affair of Honor" is an unfortunate title which applies to nobody participating in the new play at the Barrymore, unless it is the star, Dennis King.

Mr. King is a deft and resourceful enough actor to behave as if he thought he was in a first-class comedy. Indeed, sometimes he makes "Affair of Honor" sound like one.

But when he does, it is more often than not with a look entirely his own, or a surprise inflection of an inherently dull line.

For the play is not much help to him, nor to anyone else. This talky and pompous little comedy once again takes up that age-old situation in which the conquering Army officer offers the heroine a choice of being seduced,

or causing the deaths of innumerable of her neighbors.

Abusive Lines.

This gimmick has been treated in many ways in the past, but rarely with so little wit or conviction. The lines intended to get laughs are consistently more abusive than amusing.

The characters are paper dolls, and they are not assisted by a complete lack of consistent relationships toward one another.

Bill Hoffman, the author, has what seems a remarkably inexperienced affection for the cliché. Witness such a line as "That was a woman to set fire to a man's soul."

The jokes are so pat they rattle. "Has my offer to string you up, completely unstrung you?" And later on,

"He's a right to be a lecher; he's a gentleman."

There is a great deal of argument about motives, in patriotism and amour. In fact, the subject of sex retires to humiliating defeat, beaten by death by torrents of words.

The direction, credited to Robert Douglas, is unable to add much life to essentially tricked-up situations. There is a great deal of physical tug-of-warring, arrests being made and people pushing one another in and out of doors. Never once does the muscular tension suggest that the action is real.

Suave Superior.

Mr. King is suave and superior as the British army major in the Revolution. He is very elegant putting on his

white wig to make love. And he is most sympathetic when he accuses the younger lovers of talking too much.

Betsy Palmer plays the tomboy who starts the trouble with the invaders when she sets out to blow up a bridge to save her cowardly brother's reputation. She is a dazzling girl with dramatic energy who needs stronger guidance to carry as big a role as this one.

William Prince is her suitor. He senses the artificiality of the situations and plays them with a sense of mock devastation and gaiety which is quite agreeable.

Ralph Alswang has devised some cheerful, smooth changing scenery. Neither adjective can be applied to much that goes on inside it.

"Affair of Honor"—continued

New York Post

April 8, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr. There's Peril in Costume Comedy

There are many fine things to be said of this theatrical season, but not even its most wide-eyed enthusiast can say it has recently been rich in costume comedies. It was only a couple of weeks ago that there was a disaster known as "Little Glass Clock," which dealt with the court of Louis XV, and on Friday night matters got very little better when a play by Bill Hoffman called "Affair of Honor," which had to do with the American Revolution, opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theater. It evidently takes more than picturesque period clothes to make a tedious frolic humorous.

It can at least be said for Mr. Hoffman that he was out after big game. He was apparently trying to combine Bernard Shaw with sex. My impression is that he saw Dennis King playing Gen. Burgoyne in "The Devil's Disciple," soundly admired both the play and the performance,

and thought it would be a good idea to invent a character equivalent to the witty, urbane, amiably sardonic Gentleman Johnny and show him to us engaged in an amorous duel with a pretty and desirable American girl patriot. The idea still seems sound, but it calls for a civilized wit that is not forthcoming.

There is even the possibility that the author of "Affair of Honor" also had Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure" in mind. Anyway, his Major Rogers, as he calls the Burgoyne-like soldier, offers to spare the lives of the

girl's weaking brother and six other of the local patriots, who had been engaged in an inept scheme to blow up a bridge, if the handsome young woman will spend the night with him. Since everyone in the cast keeps insisting that Major Rogers is a terribly fascinating fellow, it is the play's contention that the poor girl was grievously tempted.

It is quite understandable that the producers of the comedy, remembering how excellent Mr. King was in "The Devil's Disciple," should have thought of him for the role of the debonair and ironical Major Rogers. And I suppose it is equally understandable that Mr. King accepted it. There must be something dangerously tempting to an actor in a part that calls on him to be witty and dashing every moment he's on the stage, and has all the other players talking of how irresistible he is when he's in his dressing room. And the star does manage it with his customary expertness.

The only trouble with the entire enterprise is the fairly serious one that it isn't written with

the necessary comic skill. There is even a military trial presided over by Major Rogers to bring back the Shaw-Burgoyne memories, and this may have been one of the mistakes. For there isn't the wit or the style or the impact of a keen satirical mind at work to make the inescapable comparison bearable, and "Affair of Honor," trapped between heavy-handed farce, clumsy romantic comedy, and its wistful attempts to be Shavian, limps unhappily to its conclusion.

In addition to Mr. King's adroit extension of his Burgoyne performance, the play has the advantage of a pleasant portrayal of the girl by Betsy Palmer, who brings to her rather equivocal part notable good looks and a deft sense of comedy. On the other hand, William Prince, who is a good actor, is handicapped by a role that starts out as if it were to be one of those tall-talking early Americans of the Mark Twain school and then drifts off into nothing. But it is too much to expect of actors that they should save so feeble a costume antic as "Affair of Honor."

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

April 7, 1956

THEATER

'Affair of Honor'

By WALTER F. KERR

AS A certain Maj. Rogers, head of a British detachment during the American Revolution, Dennis King is a cynic, a lecher, and a man who doesn't mind hanging any number of hostages. He explains, however, that he has been known to pat a dog. The dog he was patting last night was a play called "Affair of Honor."

Mr. King shows no end of tenderness to the curious spectiment the Theater Guild is housing at the Barrymore. He is infinitely kind to it, elaborately bestowing upon it all his very best handkerchief-flourishes, jovial head-shakings, and eyebrow acrobatics. From the time that he enters a crossroads tavern near the Vermont border, he is serenely confident, quite as though he had read the script and come away with his reason intact. He is more than that. He is fastidious—fastidious both in his enunciation of such lines

as he feels he can get away with and in his renunciation of those no mortal man could hope to sell. (He has a very nice way of pitching utterly impossible jests so high you can't hear them, of neatly brushing others right off his epaulets, and of occasionally interrupting himself with a snort or a bark before the author's thought can be fully and fearfully developed.)

Listen to him threaten to retire and leave his subordinates without a pair of boots to lick, or snap off a haughty, "When in doubt, I review my troops," and you are momentarily lulled into thinking that dramatist Bill Hoffman is capable of epigram. Listen long enough, though, and refuse to be distracted by the brilliance of Mr. King's errant invention—the business of getting a stray hair back into his powdered wig, the elegance of his shudder when any one else says anything revolting—and you will eventually

notice that Mr. Hoffman is not from Ayot St. Lawrence.

He does seem to have a nodding acquaintance—and "nodding" is exactly the word for it—with Bernard Shaw. The moment the curtain goes up on all those Revolutionary mugs, jugs and old oak rafters and the red-coated spirit of Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne breezes in the door, you are unhelpfully reminded of "The Devil's Disciple." You chalk this off, however: it may be the merest coincidence, reinforced by the fact that Mr. King has virtually made a career of Shaw's Johnny Burgoyne.

In a moment, though, the world-weary strategist is taking a local lass under his wing, preparing to instruct her in the ways of love and "realistic" behavior, and the echo of a Caesar who found Cleopatra teachable begins to stir. Stirring, it blends right over into Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle: first thing you know there's a raffish parent advising a youngster about the advantages of self-surrender.

By the time Mr. King bustles into the second act brandished an umbrella and announcing that he has always found it more useful than artillery, we

are smack into the balliwick of "Arms and the Man." And—blimey—the climax of the piece comes up with a reference to "That holy terror of our childhood—Mother!" a sentiment which is remarkably similar in design and spirit to the funniest and most famous remark in "The Admirable Bashville." You can't duck echoes forever.

If the general outlines, and the constant inversions of normal character, are distractingly Shavian, the language is not. "Have the good sense to show a little stupidity," someone suggests. "Has my offer to string you up completely unstrung you?" asks the principal bon vivant. And since the verbal impudence never gets much beyond the "I never pay attention to facts, facts are too limiting" level, the narrative impudence—involving a contractual seduction—seems in merely odd taste.

William Prince clenches fists and teeth and does bravely enough by a dashing American lover. Betsy Palmer smudges her pretty face and hoists her feet onto a table without really suggesting anything terribly spirited, and Daryl Grimes, Edith King, and Stanley Bell dart about with great enthusiasm.

Journal  American

April 7, 1956

New Comedy Lacks Taste

Dennis King Toils Uselessly In Poor Guild Production

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT IS RATHER difficult to understand why the Theatre Guild, which produced, or Bill Hoffman, who wrote, or Dennis King, who starred in a new show called "Affair of Honor," which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, did so. It is poor.

It is poor in a sort of pathetic way. Here again are nice people, especially Dennis

King, and a young girl named Betsy Palmer for whom every-

body wished all the best, and the festivities start off as if they're really going somewhere and then, it's hard to tell quite when, you realize that this is sheer dried shaving cream.

It isn't funny enough and it certainly isn't profound; it's dreary and in a strange way it's sort of soiled.

This department has endeavored to remain shock-proof through the years, but there's something about this conception that assails even the callous senses. A young girl is faced with the problem of going to bed with a British major (this being the era of the Revolutionary War) to save the lives of seven townsmen.

Okay, I'll accept that as a premise, but her reaction to the situation, the general apathy regarding the deal, is embarrassing. Matters which are usually reserved for the dismal environs of the smok-

ing room are hauled out and kicked around until insensible.

Fine Moments

It is always distressing to see the likes of Mr. King in such circumstances. He gives the play the full benefit of his fine timing and his acknowledged gift for comedy. There are many moments when one feels he may succeed all alone in making it come to life.

Miss Palmer tries heroically and is occasionally rewarding in brief scenes. There are acceptable supporting performances by William Prince, Edith King, Daryl Grimes, James Hickman, Stanley Bell and Anita Dangler, but the final audit is far from gratifying.

There is a largely misused word called "taste" which seems to be missing in the ceremonies at the Barrymore. Dennis King deserves a better fate.

"A Month in the Country"

The New York Times

April 4, 1956

Theatre: Charming Play by Turgenev

'Month in the Country'
Staged at Phoenix

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WHAT a charming play "A Month in the Country" is! When Turgenev wrote it in 1850, it must have seemed like a breath of fresh air, for no one in any nation was writing so sensibly then. Even now it seems like a breath of fresh air.

For Michael Redgrave has staged it at the Phoenix, where it opened last evening, with tenderness and limpidity. And a splendid cast with Uta Hagen in the leading part plays it with a grace that makes it seem entirely spontaneous.

Having been brought up in the country in an acrimonious home, Turgenev knew that bucolic peace was only a myth. In this pastoral set on a landed estate near Moscow, some hearts are broken, some innocent young people suffer for faults not of their own commission and a fearful crisis is

passed over with difficulty and pain.

But Turgenev was not among those who were crushed. For "A Month in the Country" comes out of an abundance of wit and humor as well as compassion. Although the love-sick characters make decisions reluctantly, they do make them when the time for action arrives. The mise en scene of "A Month in the Country" looks deceptively like Chekhov. But the spirit is not the same. As far as dramatic structure is concerned, this play is as fluid as Chekhov. But the tone is heartier and the criticism of human nature is sunnier and milder.

Using an adaptation by Emlyn Williams, Mr. Redgrave has directed a production that represents the Phoenix ideal. Everyone associated with it is in top form. Klaus Holm has designed an open-air production that is as buoyant as the play and Alvin Colt has costumed it beautifully.

There is not a slovenly performance in the lot. Perhaps we have a right to expect Miss

Hagen to act any part expertly. But her portrait of Natalia Petrovna, with its many rueful and wistful inflections, is the most moving thing she has done. It is both eloquent and subtle—saturated in emotion, but light and effortless in expression.

Go straight through the cast and the news is invariably happy. Alexander Scourby's worldly but gentle friend of the family; Olga Bielinska's broken-hearted Vera; Al Hedison's manly, bewildered tutor who unwittingly, destroys the peace of the family; Michael Strong's simple but forbearing husband; Luther Adler's comic, egotistic physician;

Ann Hennessey's angular spinster; Mary Morris' imperious dowager; Anne Meara's bridling maid; Martin Wolfson's stupid bachelor; Lou Gilbert's pedantic, kittenish German tutor—are all pungent, lively, well-drawn characterizations.

The performance matches the play in one fundamental of style: There are no broad strokes. The workmanship is carefully wrought. The lines of characterization are fine.

"A MONTH IN THE COUNTRY"

Comedy by Ivan Turgenev, adapted by Emlyn Williams; staged by Michael Redgrave; settings and lighting by Klaus Holm; costumes by Alvin Colt; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, April 3, 1956. The cast: Shaaf..... Lou Gilbert
Anna Semyonovna Yslaeva..... Mary Morris
Lizaveta Bogdanovna.....

Ann Hennessey
Natalia Petrovna..... Uta Hagen
Rakitin..... Alexander Scourby
Kolka..... Tony Atkins
Beliaev..... Al Hedison
Matvei..... Stefan Gierasch
A Footman..... Sorrell Booke
Ignaty Ilyich Shpichelsky..... Luther Adler
Vera..... Olga Bielinska
Yslaev..... Michael Strong
Katia..... Anne Meara
Bolshintsov..... Martin Wolfson

The pace is leisurely and relaxed. But within the framework of an isolated country estate, the emotional disturbance amounts to a tornado. As a writer, Turgenev was forceful enough to look at his characters from the outside and to control all their intrigues and follies. "A Month in the Country" is a charming play.

"A Month in the Country"—continued

New York Post

April 4, 1956

By Richard Watts Jr. Turgenev's 'Month in the Country'

Although Turgenev's "A Month in the Country" was written in 1849, it remains a warm, fresh, touching and remarkably "modern" comedy. While the Russian rural society that it contemplated with such affectionate irony has long since disappeared into mists of history, its characters retain the vitality, richness of spirit and odd guilelessness of heart they possessed on the day their great author created them, and, since the play springs directly and honestly from their joys and sorrows and intimate relationships, it continues to be a dramatic work of rare compassion and humor.

Its admirable qualities of gaiety and sweetness are well captured in the production that opened last night at the Phoenix Theater. Presented in Emlyn Williams' excellent new adaptation, understandingly staged by Michael Redgrave, attractively set and costumed by Klaus Holm

and Alvin Colt, and acted well and sometimes brilliantly by a good cast, the spirit of a beautiful play emerges clearly and attractively. "A Month in the Country" may occasionally seem a little long and desultory, but it never loses its vitality, freshness and gift for laughter.

One of the recent discoveries of the local theater appears to be that the eminent Russian dramatists, for all their sadness, propensity for melancholia and concern with human frustration, also possessed a wonderful capacity for sympathetic humor.

This winning gift has, of course, been recognized particularly in the revivals of Chekhov, and it is certainly not ignored in this production of Turgenev, with the happy result that the pungent and appealing comedy of "A Month in the Country" is its most enchanting feature. Thanks largely to Luther Adler's richly comic portrait of a sardonic doctor, the early Russian classic is a very funny play.

There are, in fact, several exceptionally amusing scenes in the revival at the Phoenix. But the work's warmly appealing humor is not confined to the episodes that are frankly comic. It extends likewise to the tender and ruefully smiling attitude of the author toward the romantic problems bedeviling his central characters, and it is the kind of humor that, instead of making the lovelorn wife, the frustrated family friend, the ingenuous ward and the bewildered young tutor absurd, gives them a touching humanity that is especially appealing.

If there is one distinguishing difference between the Chekhov

of "The Cherry Orchard" and the Turgenev of "A Month in the Country," it is for us that the former gives us a world that is clearly approaching collapse, while the latter's universe seems stable and comparatively sure of its values. There is no symbol of coming doom here, and there is a sunniness in the play's humor as it contemplates as engaging and likable a group of characters, and as winningly believable and distinctive a portrait gallery, as the theater has ever provided.

In addition to Mr. Adler's brilliantly humorous performance, there are effective portrayals by Uta Hagen as the wife, Alexander Scourby as the philosophical friend, Michael Strong as the dull but decent husband, Al Hedison as the tutor, Olga Bielinska as the ward, and, in somewhat smaller roles, by Lou Gilbert, Martin Wolfson, Mary Morris, Anne Meara and Ann Hennessey. "A Month in the Country" is a charming comedy, and it is a pleasure to have it in our midst again and to recognize its excellence once more.



New York World-Telegram

The Sun

April 4, 1956

Turgenev's 'Month in Country' at Phoenix

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The Phoenix offers a physically beautiful production of Turgenev's "A Month in the Country," surely one of the most brilliant plays in dramatic literature.

The central situation tempts one to think of it as a Russian "Picnic" of a hundred years ago. A handsome young tutor disrupts the life on a country estate, when the mistress, her ward, and a maid all fall in love with him.

The play begins bright and fretful like a sunny day. A squall intensifies into a black mood for a brief spell. Then it wafts away, and the light mellow satire takes over again.

Fragrant and Frivolous.

As director, Michael Redgrave has conceived a beautifully fluid scheme, and a

mercurial nature for the performance. The scenery of Klaus Holm is bold and light; and Alvin Colt's costumes are simply beyond compare in their festive aptness.

If the complex enchantments of the play are not fully realized, the trouble must be laid directly at the feet of two principal players.

Uta Hagen, one of our theater's most interesting actresses, plays the mistress of the estate, a beauty who is fragrant and frivolous, until her heart stumbles over a love affair which threatens to be serious. It is impossible to understand how Ina Claire failed to ever play this role with its mixture of ironic comedy and heart-break.

Miss Hagen emphasizes a fretful gloom about the character from the start. Ca-

pricious, this woman would enchant. Serious, she is moustros. And since there has been so unaccountably little sun, when the storm strikes, it loses much of its drama.

Adler in Rich Role.

Alexander Scourby has a long role, in the older lover who loses out to the young tutor. He has many light moments, but the part could stand a great richness of deliberate charm, in which he never really indulges.

But some of the performances are absolute gems. Luther Adler plays the family doctor with great penetration of the author's intention. He is astute behind a buffoon's surface, and constantly adds to the play's vitality of humor.

Mary Morris, in a couple of brief scenes as a dowager, carves precisely to the lines

of a grandly traditional character, and makes every ripple of laughter count.

Ann Hennessey has one enchanting scene as a prissy companion receiving the doctor's ironical proposal. And Michael Strong makes an honest and amusing figure of the trusting husband.

The role of the young ward, also heartbroken over the tutor, is played by Olga Bielinska with moving solemnity when tragedy encroaches. Her balletic mannerisms in gay moments are strangely diverting.

Al Hedison is handsome and suitably innocent as the cause of all the trouble, and Lou Gilbert adds comic detail to his brief scenes.

"A Month in the Country"—continued

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
April 4, 1956

THEATER **'A Month In the Country'**

By **WALTER F. KERR**

IN THE delightful new production of Turgenev's "A Month in the Country" at the Phoenix Theater, Uta Hagen first steels herself to dismiss a young tutor with whom she has unwisely fallen in love, then turns a distraught face away from him and moans "I'm not doing this at all well!"

But she is doing it very well indeed. The scene at hand requires Miss Hagen to suppress all her own most obvious and passionate emotions, to betray them fleetingly in unguarded gestures, to despise herself for the mess she is making of things, and to laugh at herself for the romantic fool she is. It's a tall order in anybody's prompt script, and the number of contrary impulses the actress is able to keep suspended in midair—delicately, touchingly, and with

devastating humor—is little short of dazzling.

Actually, Miss Hagen has this bored, yearning, easily-stirred heroine at her finger-tips throughout the evening. As she tries to prod the truth out of an inexperienced girl who may be her rival in love, circling her with affection and suspicion in the same wily movement, she makes an internal tug-of-war unerringly clear. And as she confesses her love to the man in question, knowing that the affair is hopeless and that her admission can do no more than abase her, the wilfulness and the wistfulness of a very complex woman come together in a precise, perfectly-tooled cameo.

Hot on her heels in the Michael Redgrave production—

and sometimes romping off with whole scenes between his teeth—is bearded, snuff-taking, owlishly outspoken Luther Adler. Mr. Adler is playing a family doctor who has risen from the lower classes and who cannot, under any circumstances, keep himself from speaking the wholesome, lip-smacking truth. It is exhilarating to watch him clasp his hands enthusiastically, plunge into a little game of deceit as though he were going to see it blithely through, and then blurt out the horrendous facts of the case as bluntly as possible. Mr. Adler is transparently enjoying himself in "A Month in the Country" and his joy is contagious; it's his best performance in years.

And it is really the candor of these two strangely luminous figures that gives most of the play its sharp-witted charm. Turgenev, who wrote the piece in 1850, is often linked with his countryman Chekhov, largely because of their common interest in a frustrated landscape. If Turgenev anticipated Chekhov in certain aspects of portraiture, though, there are still enormous differences between the two men. In Turgenev's time the rustle

of the landowners' gowns was still a rustle of silk; it hadn't begun to show patches. The brooding goes on, but it can still end in grace. More than that, Turgenev's people are capable of genuine self-knowledge, not doomed to futile and inaccurate self-analysis. Because their minds are clear and they speak them clearly—even when they are clearly wrong—an aura of conscious wit, shrewd intelligence, and genuine zest surrounds the tea-party of the condemned.

Mr. Redgrave's perceptive direction has drawn these eminently attractive qualities from nearly all of the performers at the Phoenix: from Al Hedison as the startled tutor, from Alexander Scourby as a friend who never quite makes the romantic grade, and from Mary Morris, Ann Hennessey, Olga Bielinska, and Michael Strong as family stalwarts. The Emlyn Williams adaptation is crisp and sure, the Klaus Holm settings are simple and gracious, and—apart from a faintly desultory beginning—"A Month in the Country" is thoroughly beguiling.

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Robert Coleman's THEATRE:

Tip-Top Turgenev Presented at Phoenix

• Uta Hagen, Luther Adler vibrant in revival of "A Month in the Country."

Ivan Turgenev and Anton Chekhov were masters at portraying ineffectual Russian aristocrats and intellectuals. Chekhov approached the task with dour determination, while Turgenev brought grace and wry humor to it. The latter was the more polished, more the man of the world.

David Ross is giving us a definitive Chekhov cycle at his 4th Street Theatre, and now T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton are reviving Turgenev's "A Month in the Country" at the nearby Phoenix. In an adaptation by Emlyn Williams, which on the whole is excellent, though a few of its colloquialisms jar the ear a bit.

"A MONTH in the Country"

centers around Natalia Petrovna, who seeks romance through fear of approaching middle age. Seeks it with her son's tutor. As a result, he and her husband's best friend who has become involved in the matter, leave for Moscow, to preserve the honor of the family.

Natalia's young ward, also in love with the tutor, marries an

elderly landowner to escape from a house in which she no longer feels welcome. So the restless Natalia is left lonely and frustrated. But still virtuous, in spite of herself.

Uta Hagen is vibrant as the Natalia seeking affection and discomfiting those about her. Turgenev, being a novelist at heart, has penned several asides, introspective soliloquies, which Miss Hagen brings off beautifully. Alexander Scourby, with a sound foundation in the classics, stands out as the suave and philosophic friend of the family.

TURGENEV, LIKE Chekhov, pits the shrewd and practical peasant against the dreamy and impractical aristocrat. In this instance, it is a doctor who knows how to butter his bread, to obtain three horses and a cart for one with a broken leg, by serving as a matchmaker.

This is a gem of characterization, magnificently realized by Luther Adler. His is one of the finest performances you are likely to see this or any other season. Olga Bielinska achieves genuine emotional impact as the unhappy ward, while Al Hedison is effectively straightforward as the tutor.

And there are helpful contributions by Mary Morris, Ann Hennessey, Lou Gilbert, Michael Strong, Martin Wolfson and Anne Meara.

MICHAEL REDGRAVE, who has played the worldly Rakitin for lengthy runs in London, has staged the play with a skillful hand. Klaus Holm's attractively simple settings, and Alvin Colt's costumes, are other assets.

Adler has several comic sequences that would be high spots in any Broadway revue, though our Main Stem writers could not pen their equal with half the cleverness and insight into humanity that Turgenev has. With Miss Hennessey and Wolfson as foils, he is a cynical equivalent of our revue funny-men.

"A Month in the Country" is a feather in the cap of the Phoenix. One of its most rewarding productions to date. We can only wonder why Turgenev has been neglected in New York since 1930, when the Theatre Guild presented this delightful tragi-comedy with a stellar cast headed by Alla Nazimova.